

### ***Chinatown Days: A Review.***

Author: Rita Chowdhury. Genre: Historical Novel. Publisher: Macmillan,  
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The event of the publication of Dr. Rita Chowdhury's novel *Makam* in 2010 truly becomes "an event" in Indian Social Historiography. It set a new record in the publication history of Assamese novel. Ten editions of Assamese version were completely sold out in the first year. Chowdhury herself translated this novel into English with the title *Chinatown Days* and Macmillan has released it this year (2018) for the world. The book is rapidly achieving wide critical acclaim from its readers and its critics and the gallop of the Golden horse seems unstoppable. This novel is actually a moving historical saga which presents an untold tale, a tale of terrible injustice done on a tiny minor group of innocent people which can be termed as a subaltern group. But, to say precisely at the outset, it is a moving saga where these subaltern people question and abrogate the received ideology and identity that the Centre or the State India is constructing as the real "Indian Identity" and legitimizing. Hence, it is a daring and an exceptional discourse. Heart touching depiction of the life history and the spirit of those people mark a deep impact on the reader's heart. When a reader reads this novel, s/he undoubtedly realizes the power of voice. Reader has to ponder once again about what life is, what the meaning of life is and what humanity is. Wordsworth's poem will echo once again in readers mind with the thundering voice and dismay –"What man has made of man".

This compelling historical novel recounts the life story of a group of people whose ancestors were Chinese, but they become Assamese whole heartedly after many years of settlement in Assam. Therefore, they were Indians. The history is unfolded from the early nineteenth century to the present. British discovered Tea in Assam and planned to overthrow the Chinese singular supremacy in the world Tea Market. Visionary and the businessman Robert Bruce saw a dream of green gold with his open eyes and started to work hard towards fulfilling this dream. And these Chinese people were the soldiers of this green war. British East India Company brought these Chinese people to India as indentured labour and forced them to work in the newly planned Tea Gardens of Assam. Later, people from Orissa (Odisha) were also brought for the same purpose. But, these poor people were brought to

Assam by treachery and by false promise. Gradually, amidst untold sufferings, hardships and broken dreams they learnt to find contentment. These were very painful histories and worthy of reading to get insights about these forgotten people, about Tea and about Teagardens, about the remoulding of Assamese Society and Assamese Culture and above all to get insights about the human nature. This is a true social history. The exuberant narrative of those incidents and experiences and mastery of storytelling will never fail to touch the heart of the reader and will give a vivid picture of that time, of Assam's geography, politics and of common people.

Gradually, after many years of service in these Gardens, these people spread out from the tea gardens and made their permanent residence in nearby villages and towns and they began to earn a livelihood through carpentry and shoe-making. Later on, after noticing their prosperity, some relatives of these people living in the poor South China side also came to settle down there. Thus, in Makum, a small town in upper part of Assam, formed a Chinatown which was complete with its restaurants and a club house. These Chinese people were the first people brought by British to teach the local people how to cultivate tea and how to make boxes to cart tea. Their progeny become moderately prosperous and also become integral part of the ethnic mosaic of Assam. Their roots slowly deeply rooted in the soil of Assam. But, the journey to that point was not a rollercoaster ride. Reader will be mesmerized by the epic like story of them. After 1947, they regarded themselves as citizens of independent India. But, in 1962, India-China War took place which ushered in a maelstrom of anti-Chinese prejudice and changed everything. This anti-Chinese prejudice constitutes the third part of the novel. This part is an unbearable account of this entire community which make reader's eyes wet. Indian officers came there and arrested them. Many were even not Chinese. They were sent to Nagaon jail. Later on, these people were bundled into goods trains to Deoli, a refugee camp in Rajasthan. The journey was seven days long torturous journey; some died in the train for extreme heat, some gave birth in the train. Many wasted their life in Nagaon Jail. Regarding this, Chowdhury shares a shocking and a real pathetic incident of a nine-year-old girl, Yu Yu. "She fainted due to extreme heat in Deoli and was taken to be dead by the authorities and buried alive. By the time her screams were heard from down below, she died" (Pisharoty). In the tremendous heat of Rajasthan their conditions worsened and they suffered unbearable hardships. Their sufferings did not end there. Families were divided forever. The ruling elites directed all the frustration, anger and

suspicion against these innocent Sino-Assamese people in 1962 and placed them in front of their own people and country as “spies” and at the end deported them to China and others were left in this world to find an identity for themselves. Reader will wonder where humanity was at that time. 1500 hundred people in total were deported to China. But, the pathetic predicament for them was that though China was their original homeland, it did not recognise them as one of their own and these people had also forgotten their Chinese origin.

In short, looking through the eyes of Mei Lin, a descended from the slave Ho Han, reader sees and feels how the state India betrayed these blameless and innocent people. Reader will experience what can happen when an entire community is banished. Geeta Doctor aptly remarks in *The Hindu* that “It’s a tale filled with the distant sounds of a war that ended in a rout so extreme that it signalled the end of India’s innocence in its self-determined role as the leader of a newly enfranchised democratic republic”

Till Dr. Rita Chowdhury’s initiation to enlighten this dark chapter of India’s history, they were even not recognized as a subject of our current and dominant discourse. Official documents and histories were rare. Chowdhury spent four years researching on these people to bring out this dark chapter and for that purpose she went to China to interview them. Former historians, who worked under the scrutiny of Indian hegemony, did not assign a place to them in Indian historiography and thus relegated them to oblivion. Their very identity was erased. They discarded not only “an event” of our history but also deleted those people from the very idea or theory of “Indian”. They were those people who did not act; rather, they were those upon whom the state acted. As their position in society as well as in the structure of State was in lower rank, their voice was kept muted, never heard and when heard they were punished by the authority every time and at other times ignored.

This novelistic discourse questions the hegemony of the State India and showing its defects and thereby forcing the people of India and the ruling Elites to review their own self-fashioned identity. Reader will be mesmerized by the exuberant and vivid narration of the history of the discovery of Tea in Assam, establishment of the Teagardens in Assam and slavery, Tea making procedure and its evolution, social condition of Assam, British East India Company, Ahom Kingdom and its history, Singpho kingdom, Politics of British, Politics of India, 1962 wartime condition of Assam, Assamese society, culture etc. Many historically important figures also populate this novel. Though this is not the greatest novel

by an Assamese writer, it is one of the best historical novels that a reader can have from Assamese writers.

### Works Cited

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N.B.: This review was originally published in PIONEER, the official blog of the Department of PG Studies and Research in English, Kuvempu University in August-2018.

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